

January 9, 2017

The Honorable Senator Murkowski  
709 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Senator Sullivan  
702 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Congressman Young  
2314 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Murkowski, Senator Sullivan, and Congressman Young,

I am writing to ask for your support ensuring Alaskans continue to have access to affordable broadband telehealth services in rural and Bush communities. The Rural Health Care Universal Service Support budget has remained static for 20 years and must be increased. The current \$400 million budget remains at the initial level set in 1997, despite inflation, advances in technology and increased demand for services. The FCC expects that demand may exceed the cap for the first time in funding year 2016. An equivalent budget today, adjusted for inflation, would be about \$600 million.

Rural Health Care Universal Service Support is essential to enable providers to deliver affordable broadband telehealth services in Alaska's rural and Bush communities. Alaska received more than \$82 million in rural health care support for 2015, a substantial increase from 2014.

If rural Alaskans are to continue to receive the affordable broadband telehealth services they need, the FCC must increase the rural health care budget and index it for inflation, as it recently did with E-rate. The FCC has updated the E-rate budget from \$2.25 billion in 1997 to \$3.94 billion for 2016, and indexed it for inflation, reflecting increases in demand.

Rural health care support enables telehealth services to be provided that dramatically improve access to care, accelerate diagnosis and treatment, avoid unnecessary medevacs, and expand local treatment options. *Examples of how South Peninsula hospital has been able to expand telehealth services due to this program include:*

1. Telestroke – With stroke victims, often minutes can mean the difference in treatment; our telestroke program connects patients and ER doctors to a neurologist in Anchorage or Seattle. Using extremely high definition camera, the consulting neurologist can talk to the patient about their symptoms, evaluate the patient's motor skills, view their CT scan, make a diagnosis and prescribe treatment. Strokes are the third leading cause of death in the United States and time is very important when treating them. A victim who is treated within three hours of a stroke has a significantly lower risk of permanent brain damage or death than one who waits for treatment.

2. E-ICU – Our electronic intensive care system connects patients with providers in Anchorage, providing 24/7 patient monitoring as support for local nursing and physician staff. This eliminates a costly medevac to Anchorage, and keeps the patient near family and friends as they heal.
3. VA Telehealth – The V.A. offers weekly clinic at South Peninsula Hospital that allows for local care for our veterans, supported by telehealth one day a week; the next closest VA clinic is 85 miles away, so this is the most efficient way to reach a sometimes high-risk population with the care they need.
4. Remote Radiology – A telehealth program provides remote radiology services, allowing access to expertise that would otherwise be unavailable to our patients.

Many of our patients, the residents of the southern Kenai Peninsula, benefit from the high bandwidth the Rural Health Care Telehealth program provides, which allows faster treatment and lessens the need to travel to a larger facility, far from home. And as a healthcare provider, it allows us to provide the best care possible, close to home.

We ask that you urge the FCC to increase the rural health care universal service support budget, index it for inflation, and provide for any unused funds to be carried forward to future funding years. This will ensure Alaska's rural and Bush communities continue to have access to affordable broadband telehealth services, critical for improving access to care.

Thank you for your support.



Robert Letson, CEO  
South Peninsula Hospital  
[rfl@sphosp.org](mailto:rfl@sphosp.org)  
907-235-0326

CC: Jon Wilkins  
Chief, Wireless Telecommunications Bureau  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 – 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554